



DRAFT

# Connected Educator Month

Connected Educator Month Report

## Learning With Connected and Inspired Educators

February 2013

U.S. Department of Education  
Office of Educational Technology

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# Introduction

“Every month should be Connected Educator Month.”

## Learning With Connected and Inspired Educators

As a prelude to the 2012–13 school year, thousands of educators converged online to connect and learn from one another. Drawn by professional interests and shared passions, educators gathered for hundreds of virtual events and activities at a time traditionally dedicated to professional development. For many, the virtual experiences offered fresh, different, and highly engaging professional interactions.

The August 2012 event was the first-ever Connected Educator Month, a celebration of online communities of practice and networks in education. Envisioned as an opportunity to inspire educators around the country, Connected Educator Month ended up inspiring us and scores of participating organizations as well.

Why does it matter for education? Connected Educator Month delivered at least **90,000 hours of professional development** to teachers and other educators—and demonstrated that online social learning and collaboration can complement individual, school, district, and state efforts to improve professional excellence and, ultimately, student learning. In the refrain of many participants who took advantage of the month-long feast of online offerings, “Every month should be Connected Educator Month.”

This report highlights results and insights from Connected Educator Month and offers recommendations for connecting and inspiring more educators in powerful and engaging online interactions.

# Why Connected Educator Month?

“If you were to ask people what the best part about being a connected educator is, many would probably tell you that being connected lets you learn more than you would ever learn at your own building.”

—Becky Bair, fourth-grade teacher,  
Elizabethtown Area School District, Pennsylvania

The 2010 National Education Technology Plan advocates for “highly connected teaching” in order to best support student learning (Office of Educational Technology, 2010). Through connected teaching, educators have constant access to data, digital content, and resources, as well as to experts and one another to meet the challenges of daily classroom practice and to learn and grow as professionals.

To support this model, the Office of Educational Technology launched the Connected Educators project, a collaborative, public–private effort to help education stakeholders and practitioners understand, implement, and participate effectively in online communities of practice and to learn more about the development of personal learning networks. A [review and synthesis of the research about online communities](#) (Office of Educational Technology, 2011) found documented evidence that these communities can support systematic, transformative change in teaching and learning. Specifically, online communities empower educators to

- Access, share, and create knowledge
- Build professional identity, relationships, and collaboration

This research, along with a review and analysis of notable online communities, also uncovered a thriving ecosystem of opportunities for educators to learn and collaborate online. Thousands of educators connect with the assistance of hundreds of projects and organizations, which offer online events, activities, tools, and social spaces appropriate to educators in virtually any subject area, grade level, and role. They follow each other, ask questions, and share expertise. Moreover, educators who take advantage of these opportunities value them considerably and believe they are essential to their professional lives.

Still, while growing in numbers, many educators are not yet participating in professional online communities or networks (MMS Education, edWeb, & MCH Strategic Data, 2012; PBS & Grunwald, 2011). In light of the potential benefits, this is a missed opportunity for individual educators and their students—and for schools, districts, states, and organizations that also stand to benefit from empowered, connected educators.

This insight spurred the Connected Educators project to orchestrate Connected Educator Month, an unprecedented initiative of the

U.S. Department of Education to bring together scores of participating organizations and engage educators en masse in online professional experiences. The broad goals of Connected Educator Month were as follows:

**Five Broad Goals of Connected Educator Month**

1. Raise the visibility and showcase the benefits of online social learning and collaboration.
2. Encourage unconnected educators to get connected and give connected educators more ways to broaden and deepen their participation.
3. Promote the practice of being a “connected educator” as central to what it means to be a member of a profession that demands continual learning and growth.
4. Support innovation in an emerging and promising field.
5. Encourage more collaboration among organizations and individual educators and to accelerate progress toward a more seamless, connected education community.

# 31 Event-Filled Days: Design and Elements of Connected Educator Month

“Connected Educator Month was a powerful and creative way to get educators together around topics of shared passion. For me it was a month-long celebration of connectedness and learning that pushed my thinking and inspired me to create.”

—Laurie Toll, technology integration specialist,  
Osseo Area Schools, Maple Grove, Minnesota

Recent research about social learning and engagement of participants guided the nontraditional design and elements of Connected Educator Month. Organizations can best support learning if they find ways to tap into the existing “flow” of interests and learning and shape the contexts in which learning is already occurring (Hagel, Brown, & Davison, 2010; Thomas & Brown, 2011), rather than trying to impose their own agendas. Organizations can, at the same time, serve an important and emerging leadership role as “systems conveners” who create social learning spaces that “engage people across boundaries in the landscape” to work together to solve complex challenges, such as those that abound in education (Wenger-Trayner, n.d.).

Emerging models of connected education also informed the programming of online events and activities of Connected Educator Month. For example, the “connectivist” form of massively open online courses (MOOCs)—a type of online course aimed at large-scale participation and open access that is gaining in popularity internationally—engage participants by inviting

them to participate as much or as little as they want and by encouraging them to independently develop content, engage in activities, and interact with others (Mackness, Mak, & Williams, 2010). These participant activities complement core content and activities and are flexible enough to accommodate a wide range of individual schedules and needs. The content and conversations can be aggregated and shared long after the courses are over.

## Four Key Strategies of Connected Educator Month

The U.S. Department of Education took on the leadership role and served as the convener of Connected Educator Month. With the broader goals of connected education in mind, and guided by the research, the Connected Educators project developed four key strategies to create social learning spaces that would engage educators and organizations alike:

1. Offer **core programming** derived from educators’ and organizational interests.



2. Foster cross-organizational and cross-disciplinary collaboration with comprehensive **communication and coordination**.
3. **Support participants and organizations** with multiple opportunities to engage in and build upon core programming and to connect with others around shared interests.
4. Extend the reach and the impact of the core programming and connections beyond the 31-day blitz with **postevent activities, resources, and archives**.

The Connected Educators project worked in concert with scores of participating organizations to execute these strategies. Highlights of the core programming, communication and coordination, support for participants and organizations, and postevent efforts follow. A complete description of these elements is provided in the Appendix.

## STRATEGY 1: Core Programming

### *Tapping Into the Flow of Interests*

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“[I] think the initial kickoff panels were very thought-provoking (at least for me) and really set the tone for my thinking for the entire month with regard to my blog posts, my participation in forums, and discussions on Twitter.”

—Stephanie Sandifer, 15-year educator, technology coach, and author, Houston, Texas

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Connected Educator Month was launched with a “spine” of core programming, seeding a highly distributed, much larger collection of events and activities among the participating organizations. This core programming served as a focal point around which organizations could build diverse, flexible, and connected learning experiences:

**Six Themes and Forums.** The Connected Educators project reached out for input on topics for the event to participating organizations and through this process, identified six themes:

1. [21st century professional development](#)
2. [Personalized learning](#) (“It’s Personal”)
3. [Distributed leadership and teacher-led change](#) (“Beyond Top Down”)
4. [New technologies and connected education](#) (“Knocking on the Door”)
5. [Incentives and recognition](#) (“Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due”)
6. [Connected education and the first six weeks of school](#)

A combination of real-time and asynchronous elements, including online panels during the month’s opening and closing sessions and forums throughout the month, kept the spotlight on these six themes. Participating organizations contributed to this emphasis.

**The Connected Educator Month Website** served as a [hub](#) for all activities, with links to activities of scores of participating organizations.

**Kickoff.** Connected Educator Month began with a [three-day kickoff](#), launched at midnight on August 1, 2012, that included real-time panels, keynotes, debates, and informal chats featuring thought leaders both inside and outside education. This packed three-day opening to the month galvanized attention on the event and gave educators a window into the variety of ways in which they could participate.

**A Worldwide Virtual Conference.** A five-day midmonth [Learning 2.0 conference](#) featured renowned education thought leaders, who initiated a global conversation on rethinking teaching and learning in the age of the Internet.

**Wrap-Up and Next Steps.** The *final sessions* of Connected Educator Month revisited many of the same topics as the opening sessions; their primary purpose was to synthesize the events of the month, reflect on the collective learning, and generate primary takeaways and action items for the field.

## STRATEGY 2: Communication and Coordination

### *Engaging People Across Boundaries*

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“Connected Educator Month helps to highlight the opportunities we have to work together, share ideas, and learn from each other around the country—and around the world!”

—Sue Waters, editor,  
The Edublogger, and Edublogs community facilitator

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In the months and weeks before Connected Educator month, the organizers championed the value of formal participation by organizations, thought leaders within education and in other industries, leading practitioners, and presenters. This communication and coordination effort took many forms, including public announcements and private invitations; face-to-face and virtual meetings; and introductions, brainstorming sessions, and negotiations that led to collaborative events and activities. The project continued to work to engage organizations and individual educators before and during the event in other ways.

**Event Promotion and Outreach.** An extensive promotional and outreach plan backed every aspect of Connected Education Month. The promotion and outreach included

- Daily newsletters distributed via e-mail and LinkedIn groups with coordinated Twitter tweets and retweets and Facebook posts
- Regular, targeted communications including tools and materials for redistribution with participating organizations and school districts, starting in early July
- Outreach to key media outlets and bloggers
- Purposeful engagement by participating organizations to promote Connected Educator Month

**An Adaptive Calendar.** Connected Educator Month featured an open calendar that participating organizations could add to before the event and modify throughout the month. The color-coded calendar was topically tagged and designed to make it easy for educators to find topics, events, and activities that would be of interest to them.

## STRATEGY 3: Support for Participants and Organizations

### *Creating Multiple Entry Points for Engagement*

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“Connected Educator Month is wonderfully aligned with our values at TakingITGlobal (TIG). We feel that in order to serve students as learners and leaders in the 21st century, they must be empowered to think and act as global citizens, and this starts with educators being connected around the world, through the use of technology.”

—Kate Gatto, education program manager,  
TakingITGlobal

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By design, Connected Educator Month offered a vast array of events and activities. This deliberate

attempt to give people important topics—and different formats, technologies, and timeframes with which to connect and engage—had the potential to overwhelm newcomers. To mitigate that possibility, the Connected Educators project created a number of structures and tools that provided some direct support and multiple entry points for engagement in the content and the community of participants:

#### **For individuals**

- The Connected Educators Book Club brought experienced and less connected educators together to discuss Sheryl Nussbaum-Beach and Lani Ritter Hall's *Connected Educator*. Participation began during Connected Educator Month and covered a chapter a week for 10 weeks—well beyond the event.
- The Connected Educator Starter Kit provided a 31-day program for educators to get more connected, with one simple activity to engage in for each day.
- The Connected Educator Help Desk provided a question-and-answer service for participants.

#### **For participating organizations**

- A District Toolkit provided practical tools that enabled integration of Connected Educator Month into back-to-school professional development, promotion of the event to local educators, and tracking and measuring the impact of Connected Educator Month activities.
- A Resource Center provided a wide variety of materials and tools for promoting and contributing to Connected Educator Month.
- An Open House interface enabled organizations to open up their communities for educators to explore and ask managers and members questions in real time.

## **STRATEGY 4: Postevent Activities, Resources, and Archives**

### *Extending the Reach and Impact of Connected Learning*

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“Time should never be an excuse for not seeking out ways to improve #ce12.”

—Eric Scheninger, principal, New Milford High School, New Jersey

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As the research for Connected Educator Month shows, the best online social learning occurs across boundaries, including the boundaries of time and the limitations of individuals' schedules. The Connected Educators project attended to this research with postevent elements of the event, some of which are described below (see p. 23 for more), which ensure that the content and conversations live on:

**Contests.** Connected Educators encouraged organizations to develop contests, challenges, and games for the event and beyond and maintained a [dedicated list](#) on the website.

**Archive.** An [archive](#) of the events and activities of Connected Educator Month is being released with this report for those who missed some or all of it or just want to revisit or refer to the content and experience. The content remains relevant for organizations and individuals who want to use it for formal or informal professional learning—whether or not they participated during the event.

# The Impact of Connected Educator Month

“Jon participated in a Twitter chat on his smartphone about global learning while walking his dog. Claudia appreciated the mix of ages of students who shared in a ‘Student Voices’ event. Gordon liked the stories and answers he heard in two sessions on conveners in communities of practice. Stephanie thought the book club was ‘fantastic.’ And Barbara found the ‘lack of ego’ among experts refreshing. These people and others like them joined in and shared what they knew, thought, learned, or liked during Connected Educator Month.”

—D. Schaffhauser, “Connected Educator Month Brings Teachers, Others Together Online,” *T.H.E. Journal* (September 26, 2012)

The Connected Educators project used quantitative and qualitative metrics to assess the impact of Connected Educator Month during and shortly after the event. This inquiry focused on three key indicators:

- **Participation** (Once it was built, would people and organizations come?)
- **Interactions** (Which types of events were most popular? What were the hot topics? Did participants take ownership of the social learning and collaboration opportunities?)
- **Benefits** (Did the event demonstrate any tangible or intangible benefits of online social learning for educators and organizations that could help move the field forward?)

The metrics show that Connected Educator Month succeeded on all three indicators, as described in the discussion that follows.

## Extensive Participation by Individual Educators

“One teacher shared with me that, as an educator in a specialty area, she felt a sense of connectivity to a greater community and less ‘alone’ as a result of participating in a Connected Educator Month session.... I think that a number of educators who were not connected prior to August learned about a greater professional learning world beyond the walls of their classrooms.”

—Pam Moran, superintendent, Albemarle County Public Schools, Charlottesville, Virginia

Connected Educator Month was a highly distributed event, which means that participants accessed events and activities through the Connected Educators portal *and* through the websites of scores of participating organizations.

Quantifying participation required a broad scan of Internet and social networking activity before, during, and after the event. The evidence

suggests that the Connected Educators project was successful in inspiring and seeding a viral response by participating organizations and individuals, as well as by the broader education

community. Participants increasingly took ownership of the event, as demonstrated by the indicators of participation in the sidebar “Connected Educator Month by the Numbers.”

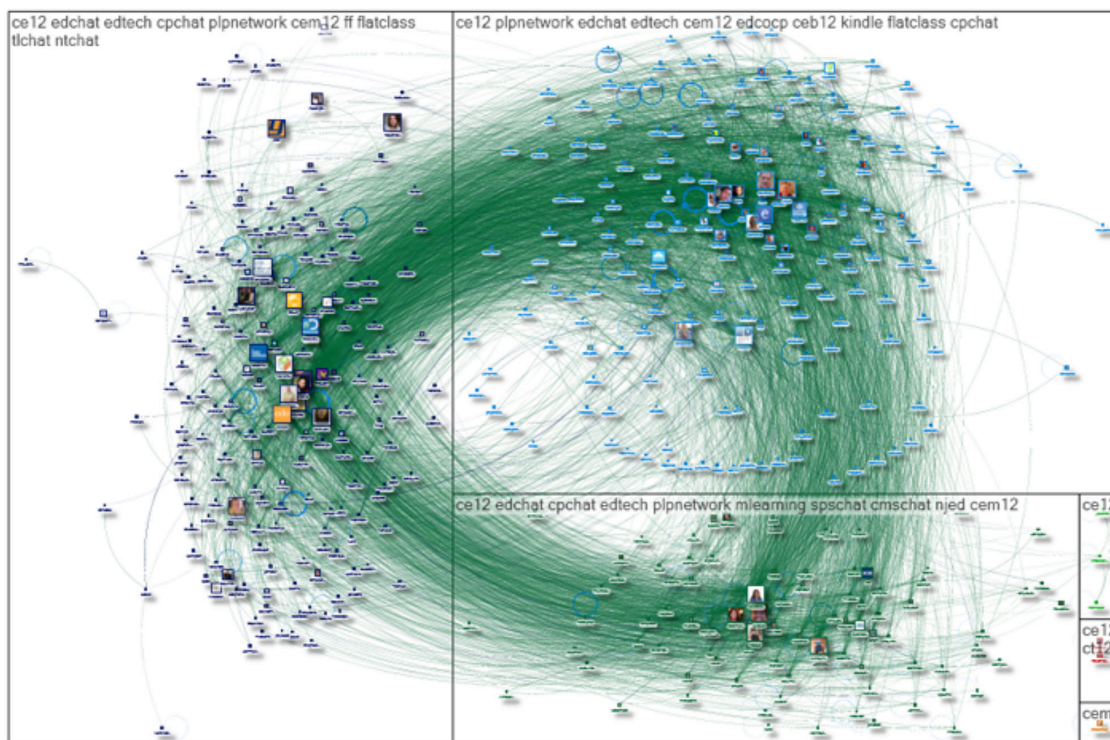
### Connected Educator Month by the Numbers

- **4 million+ followers** on the #ce12 hashtag by the end of August 2012
- **1.4 million impressions per day**, on average, on Twitter generated by Connected Educator Month hashtags
- **251,000 exact phrase references to “Connected Educator Month”** on sites throughout the Internet in August 2012, including 36,000+ references in blog posts, according to a Google search conducted at the end of August 2012
- **493,000 exact phrase references to “Connected Educator Month”** on sites throughout the Internet two months later, showing continued and growing interest in the event well after it ended

The Twitter conversation about the event vividly illustrates that individual participation was both highly distributed and highly connected. Figure 1 shows a social network diagram of the connections among people on Twitter tweeting

while using Connected Educator Month hashtags during the first 10 days of August 2012. The figure shows a strongly connected network, with a diverse group of educators playing key roles in the conversation.

**Figure 1. Twitter Activity During the First 10 Days of Connected Educator Month: A Social Network Diagram**



This visualization reveals several important patterns. First, there are relatively few isolated tweeters. Most have multiple connections to others within the network. Second, multiple central users are linking others within and across clusters. Finally, posts are linked consistently to many other top hashtags for education.



In addition, a substantial number of “less connected” educators were involved in Connected Educator Month, as indicated in such activities as the Connected Educator Month Book Club, questions posed to the help desk, and other reports (as well as the overall reach of the project in social media). For example, book club participants were asked to rate their own knowledge and expertise in using online communities and social networks (a question

asked to allow the presenters to tailor the discussion to the group). More than half said they had, at best, only average or below average or no knowledge (novice-level) at all.

Although there is still much to be done in this area, Connected Educator Month did provide an impetus to unconnected educators to make their first connections to online learning and collaboration opportunities.

## Empowering Individual Educators

### Envisioning the 21st Century Classroom

Using a scanned photo from the 1960s of her fourth-grade classroom, and a collaborative multimedia platform ([ThingLink](#)), technology integration specialist Laurie Toll of Osseo Area Schools in Maple Grove, Minnesota, launched her own collaborative project. She created an interactive Web-based poster and invited educators to “[21stcentury-ize](#)” the classroom by adding ideas, links, images, or video to the photo.

“The purpose of this project was to invite educators to collaboratively reflect and share their vision for a connected and engaged learning environment in a whimsical and meaningful way,” Toll said. “I loved the creativity and variety of responses and that people actually stopped by to contribute. It was a living, growing, dynamic document built and shared by connected educators everywhere!”

This collaborative project would not have had the same impact outside the context of Connected Educator Month, Toll said. “Connected Educator Month played a huge part in getting the message out to other educators. Leveraging the connections of colleagues involved in Connected Educator Month brought more activity to the project than if I had just shared it within my own network.”

### Sharing “A Day in the Life” of a Connected Educator

A “[Connected Educator of the Day](#)” activity gave individual educators a chance to lead or follow Twitter feeds about the daily life of a connected educator. People signed up via a wiki to a shared Twitter account. Each day, a different person was the Connected Educator of the Day, tweeting out what they were doing so the more than 500 followers could get a sense of a “day in the life” of a connected educator.

“This event created value for both those who participated as connected educators, as well as those who followed along,” said Karen Fasimpaur, dean of P2PU School of Education and president of K12 Handhelds. “I got many tweets and e-mails from folks saying how much they gained from it. For those of us who participated, it was an opportunity to reflect on how important our connectedness is and what aspects of that would be most useful to share with others. Those who followed along got hundreds of insights about being connected, links to related resources, encouragement, and new friends to network with.

Connected Educator Month inspired this collaborative project, and the connected educators themselves spread the word about the project through their own networks.

## Broad Participation by Diverse Organizations

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“Connected Educator Month demonstrated clearly the desire and the willingness of educators to work collaboratively across grade levels, learning environments, content areas, geographical settings, and experience levels to share and to learn more from one another. If educators are provided the kind of opportunities available in Connected Educator Month, they will participate-providing, cultivating, and garnering information and ideas.”

—Connected Learning Coalition

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Connected Educator Month attracted broad participation from a diverse array of organizations:

- **More than 170 organizations** supported Connected Educator Month by promoting the event in coordination with Connected Educators, including **151 leading education associations, online communities, and companies** that developed and ran events during the month. A larger number promoted Connected Educator Month activities without formal affiliation with the event. A full alphabetical listing of formally participating organizations can be found [here](#).
- At least **455 events and activities** were offered during the month by the Connected Educators project and the participating organizations.
- More than **2,200 speakers** were involved, including many thought leaders and leading practitioners.

Real-time (synchronous) events dominated during Connected Educator Month. The top four event types were all synchronous: webinars (40.9%), online chats (11.1%), Twitter events (10.3%), and

open houses (10.0%). Organizations seemed to want to take advantage of synchronous learning opportunities and to showcase technologies that are not typically used in professional development for educators.

## Putting Learning First

With the mix of participants, participating organizations, events, and activities during Connected Educator Month, the online interactions, conversations, and topics of interest could have veered in many directions. What actually happened demonstrates the strength of the design and core programming of the event, as well as the collaboration among the Connected Educators project and participating organizations.

About half the events covered topics aligned with the six topical themes promoted for the month-long event, indicating that these themes resonated with participating organizations and reflected their knowledge of their constituencies. The other half of the events focused on topics that emerged organically on their own, indicating that participating organizations and individual participants shaped the social learning and collaboration opportunities to meet their interests and needs. For example, EdLeader21 recognized the need to create a leadership track, and, with support from the Connected Educators project, a dozen organizations developed programming for a Leadership Week.

In general, however, even the topics that emerged during the month reflected prominent issues and themes in education reform and educational technology. Most fell into one or more broad areas of coverage, as shown in the sidebar “Broad Topics of Conversation.”

## Broad Topics of Conversation During Connected Educator Month

- Getting connected and why (often featuring testimonies by connected educators)
- Using new technologies—how and why, including everything from whiteboards to wikis
- New technologies on the horizon—and how to get buy-in for what is already available
- New ways of thinking and new pedagogies
- Education reform and distributed leadership
- The first six weeks of school (e.g., classroom setup and management, team planning, outreach to parents)
- Student achievement and teacher productivity
- Global education

## Specific Hot Topics

- Games and gaming
- Mobiles and tablets
- Common Core State Standards
- Flipped classrooms
- Informal and peer professional development

An analysis of the frequency with which words appeared in event and activity descriptions revealed that “learning” and related terms were most frequently used, as shown in Figure 2. In a similar analysis of transcripts from sessions focused on recognizing and supporting online social professional learning, “teachers” emerged as a frequently occurring word as well. Some events were leadership-oriented, especially during the month’s Leadership Week, but a majority of activities were targeted on teachers. Although technology topics were popular, participating organizations and participants were most interested in how technology can support learning and teaching.

**Figure 2. Visualization of Word Frequency in Calendar and Event Descriptions for Connected Educator Month**





## Benefits: Professional Development, Collaboration, and Shared Purpose

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“Many participating organizations offered online learning and collaboration opportunities because, for the first time, they saw themselves as part of a shared project to support connected educators.”

—U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan

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Several data points and observations indicate that Connected Educator Month achieved some additional tangible and intangible benefits that are important for understanding the value of the event. These benefits could contribute to the value proposition for organizations interested in creating more opportunities to connect and inspire educators.

### Professional Development

- Connected Educator Month delivered at least 90,000 hours of professional development.
- Among participating organizations, 85 percent reported that attendance at their Connected Educator Month events was the same as or higher than attendance at similar events they have held on their own, with a majority indicating higher or much higher numbers.

### Collaboration

- More than a quarter of participating organizations’ Connected Educator Month events and activities, and all core programming,

involved multiple groups working together or in collaboration—a key goal and, for some organizational leaders, a real breakthrough of the event. This does not include the observed high levels of cross-promotion and the participatory formats that engaged educators in collaboration.

- Click-throughs from links created to promote events and activities suggest that the top 25 most popular events or activities were *all* collaborative, meaning that they were created by or featured two or more organizations, or individuals representing two or more organizations, or were collaborative projects that many educators contributed to. That trend continued through the lineup of activities. Forty-seven of the top 50 events were collaborative, as were 78 of the top 100.

### Shared Purpose

- More generally, the event appeared to generate a sense of shared purpose. The best example of this was the “adopt a colleague” program, in which participating educators banded together to reach out to their peers and encourage them to become connected for the first time. This program first emerged in [Connected Educator Month’s first session](#), and it was increasingly supported and fleshed out in the blogosphere (see, e.g., these well-circulated posts by [Stephen Anderson](#) and [Stephanie Sandifer](#)).

# Lessons From Connected Educator Month

“Connected Educator Month meant a lot to me, my organization, and others I work with. The importance of being a ‘connected educator’ can’t be overestimated, and it was great to see ‘official’ (especially U.S. Department of Education) recognition of that. Over the course of the month, I reflected on the power and importance of my own connections, made new connections, and tried to reach some people who aren’t already connected.”

—Karen Fasimpaur, dean of P2PU School of Education,  
and president of K12 Handhelds

The measured and observed impact of Connected Educator Month suggests several broader lessons for the education community.

These lessons support the goals of Connected Educator Month:

- Raising the visibility and showcasing the benefits of online social learning and collaboration
- Broadening and deepening participation in online communities and networks
- Promoting the practice of being a “connected educator” as central to professional identity and excellence
- Supporting innovation in the field
- Encouraging collaboration among organizations and individuals

## The Time Is Right and Educators Are Ready

The groundswell of participation from organizations and individual educators indicates that there seems to be a hunger in the field for online social learning and collaboration. Many educators around the country already are enthusiastically participating, and others are ready to connect, learn, and collaborate for the first time.

Moreover, the technologies that support online learning and collaboration are relatively mature, accessible, and affordable. Organizations have a range of tools for hosting communities, offering webinars and other synchronous events, and producing multimedia content. The technology infrastructure, therefore, contributed to the success of Connected Educator Month. Furthermore, educators and organizations are eager to use technology to support meaningful interactions around teaching, learning, strategies, and challenges.

## What Is the Right Time?

Connected Educator Month was held in August, a time when educators are thinking about and planning for school, participating in professional development, and making their resolutions for the coming year. Some educators, however, were already back at school and some were still on summer vacation.

For future events, consideration should be given to earlier in the summer, or October, beyond the initial crush of the new school year, or even in the spring. Activities that require more intense, sustained participation *before* the month begins and that continue after the month ends also should be identified.

## Validation Matters

One of the most common themes in Connected Educator Month content and discussions was the need to make online social learning and collaboration count as legitimate professional development.

The U.S. Department of Education's visible endorsement of Connected Educator Month encouraged individual and organizational participation—and participants' self-identification as connected educators.

Beyond its financial backing, it provided high-profile support for participants' efforts through statements at the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) opening session, press releases, a video of U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan recorded for the Connected Educators website, and numerous tweets from @arneduncan and @usedgov as well as @officeofedtech. Feedback from participating individuals and organizations suggests that this support mattered. Some organizations decided to participate because of the event's association with and in some cases in response to the strength of the U.S. Department of Education's support. In feedback and in social media

postings, several organizational and thought leaders said that they felt that the federal government recognized and supported their efforts to contribute to educators' professional learning and empowerment.

Connected Educator Month participants want districts and schools to recognize educators' participation in online communities as well. As detailed in *Connect and Inspire*, the 2011 draft report about online communities for educators, very few educators receive continuing education units or other forms of formal credit for learning achieved through activities and events such as those featured during Connected Educator Month. Even fewer are encouraged to devote time during the school day to peer learning online. During CEM, at least one participating social network, edWeb.net, did send out continuing education certificates (more than 2,100 in edWeb's case) to educators who attended its webinars or watched recordings, but not all educational organizations recognize such certificates for continuing education credit because the associated evidence of learning is not yet understood, accepted, or codified.

As a result, online social learning and collaboration are largely done on educators' own

time and initiative. This is certainly laudable, and the prevalence and volume of such activity is a testament to the professionalism and commitment of educators. The lack of formal recognition and support, however, is likely a significant barrier to extending the benefits of participation to educators who are not yet connected.

## Convene, Support—and Play Matchmaker

“It was helpful to have the information on our two webinars posted on dozens of sites that we wouldn’t otherwise have access to. It also felt like we were part of a national trend/event that was much bigger than anything we would be a part of on our own.”

—Ken Kay, CEO, EdLeader21, a professional learning community for 21st century education leaders

The distributed design of Connected Educator Month—with some core programming organized by the Connected Educators project and much

more programming provided by participating organizations—allowed the event to engage significantly more educators than would have been possible had ED staged the event alone.

At least 80 percent of the activity during Connected Educator Month took place through events hosted by participating organizations not formally affiliated with the Connected Educators initiative or through social media interactions not directly attributable to the event’s social media presence. In many cases, the Connected Educators project assisted organizations in seeing the value of participation, envisioning possible contributions, and finding partners, as well as promoting and archiving their offerings.

The convening, supporting, and “matchmaking” effort involved in orchestrating the event, however, pales in comparison to that which would have been required in order to offer a similar intensity of activities or events directly. Foregoing centralized control also contributed to the widespread sense of identification that participating organizations expressed with the collective project of creating connected educators.

### Brokering Relationships

Many of the most lively and best attended events during August resulted from partnerships between participating organizations. By combining the existing networks of educators each partner had already built and taking advantage of broader connections during the larger event—plus the role collaboration plays in generating more compelling events to begin with—organizations touched more educators and accessed segments of their potential audience they had not yet reached.

“There is no question that involvement in CEM increased participation in our event,” said Ken Kay, CEO of EdLeader21, whose idea for Leadership Week resulted in programming that had not originally been planned and new partnerships to provide that programming. “The first webinar had over 100 attendees and we would have had less than half that on our own.”

The Connected Educators team played a brokering role in several collaborative efforts, encouraging partnerships and helping organizations find others with similar interests and goals for their participation. For example, the team knew that, among others, three states—Alabama, California, and Indiana—were doing work on state-level social learning that could be of interest to others. The project invited leaders in these states to collaborate on a webinar for Leadership Week—an event that drew about 450 participants.

Some of these project-brokered cosponsored events brought together organizations and individuals who might not otherwise have interacted outside the context of Connected Educator Month. These events thus served as boundary encounters that prompted the organizations and the educators they engaged to identify common needs and opportunities for further collaboration aligned with the vision of connected teaching (Wenger-Trayner, n.d.).

## Beyond “Build It and They Will Come”

The behind-the-scenes effort to stage Connected Educator Month was much more involved than simply “building a calendar and they will come.”

In addition to the U.S. Department of Education’s financial support and high-profile recognition—and playing a convening, supporting, and matchmaking role—the Connected Educators project served as the project manager of a sustained, complex event that involved scores of organizations and thousands of individual presenters. A critical and time-intensive element of the event was identifying, recruiting, and supporting these participants, particularly because their creative contributions, authority, and reach are necessary for success.

The variety of support materials developed for the [Connected Educator Month Resource Center](#) provides a sense of the advance planning involved. Each of these resources helped at least one key organization participate in Connected Educator Month (according to the organizations). In many cases, the *depth* of the materials was key as well. Getting organizations on board and fully participating also required many one-to-one communications, webinars, in-person meetings, and frequent, sometimes lengthy, group communications in the lead-up to the event.

Above all, organizing an event like Connected Educator Month requires time. Sufficient lead time is essential for the convener (or conveners) to carry out many key responsibilities, as detailed in the sidebar “Key Responsibilities for Conveners.”

## Key Responsibilities for Conveners

### Planning

- Developing a compelling vision for the event, with concrete examples and benefits that make potential participants want to get involved
- Designing core programming and interactions of the event itself, and selecting and identifying the synchronous and asynchronous technologies
- Determining the qualitative and quantitative metrics that will be used to measure success

### Promoting

- Developing and executing a robust promotion and outreach plan that includes high-frequency updates (at least daily) of website content and social media feeds—but also strongly employing e-mail and traditional media outreach
- Developing authentic relationships with social media outlets well in advance of when they are needed, and identifying and engaging with individuals or groups who have those trusted relationships
- Determining how everyone involved in the event, including all participating organizations and individual speakers, can contribute to its promotion in ways that will work for them

### Implementing

- Developing and following a comprehensive work plan and project management system that is flexible and responsive (many moving parts, moving fast)
- Creating constructs (e.g., Leadership Week) and mechanisms (e.g., collaborative documents) that help groups self-organize together, making it easier for people to participate

### Evaluating

- Determining the qualitative and quantitative metrics that will be used to measure success
- Collecting and analyzing the data

# Next Steps and Recommendations for Moving Forward

“Connected Education Month is a great opportunity to listen to some of education’s brightest minds as well as to collaborate with fellow educators in preparation for the upcoming school year.”

—Daniel Guerrero, teacher and lecturer,  
Teaching With Technology, San Francisco, California

Online social learning and collaboration are largely done on educators’ own time and initiative. This is certainly laudable, and the prevalence and volume of such activity is a testament to the professionalism and commitment of educators. **There’s certainly much work that needs to be done to determine and codify the evidence for learning in these environments**, but the lack of formal recognition and support is likely a significant barrier to extending the benefits of participation to educators who are not yet connected. Following are broad recommendations for the education community, and specific ways in which states, districts, and education organizations could support connected teaching.

## 1. Make Participation Count

Participation in online communities of practice is a legitimate way of improving professional practice—and it should be recognized as such. The Connected Educators project is developing, collecting, and distributing tools, templates, and examples that demonstrate how participation might count. For example, the project is developing an online catalog to aggregate

and identify digital badges as a way to help organizations make participation count.

In addition, a small but growing number of schools and districts, such as New Milford High School in New Jersey and Albemarle School District in Virginia, already have policies that might serve as models for others. From these models and the advice of professional learning experts, quantitative and qualitative benchmarks could be developed, and common documentation formats could be created and promoted.

State education agencies, districts, and educational leadership organizations could contribute to this effort to provide credit to connected educators in several ways:

- **Develop ways to assess how participation fulfills local, state, and national standards for professional learning and teacher quality.** Many state and district teacher evaluation systems include standards for professional leadership and collaboration and contributions to online education communities and networks might provide particularly powerful evidence of excellence of meeting those standards (Goe, Biggers, & Croft, 2012).



- **Convene state, district, and school leaders, experts in job-embedded professional development, and online social learning practitioners** to discuss and further develop tools, templates, and examples, as well as to examine alignment with professional standards.
- **Develop and encourage the adoption of digital badging systems that guide and document development of professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions** through online social learning and collaboration. Badges can be powerful, flexible means for recognizing professional growth and achievement. They were a frequent topic of discussion during Connected Educator Month, and a number of participating organizations already are issuing them.

## 2. Make Participation Easier

Many Connected Education Month participants found great value in the Connected Educator Month starter kit, calendar, newsletters, social media, and other tools that helped participating organizations find structure and value in the event. Even with these mechanisms in place, however, some participants found it difficult to manage the volume of content and activities and to determine the best value for their time investment. Some worried that not-yet-connected educators could be quickly overwhelmed and give up.

Conveners and organizations participating in future events could make it easier for individual educators, particularly those who are new to online events and activities, to participate with these steps:

- **Create maps, or tools that organize online offerings, in ways that enable educators to**

**navigate the landscape and chart a path through it that is appropriate to their individual needs.** Research on open, connected learning approaches points to “sense making and way finding” as key challenges (Siemens & Titterberger, 2009). New models that help educators find what they are looking for quickly and easily, and help them make smart choices about online offerings, would be valuable ways of addressing a persistent need.

For example, future maps of the online social learning landscape might suggest sequences of activities that work together to progressively enhance educators’ understanding or iteratively develop cocreated knowledge. Future maps also might take the form of heat maps that dynamically visualize where other educators are interacting online, around which topics, and to what ends. If educators are comfortable with this kind of tracking, their use of common profiles to interact with multiple online social learning and collaboration spaces, sequences, and heat maps could be filtered to focus on content and activity that most closely connects to their expertise, interests, goals, and challenges.

- **Build in time for connecting.** Many connected educators reach out to online resources, peers, and experts on their own time. Online professional learning and collaboration should be a legitimate use of educator planning and professional development time.

## 3. Broaden and Deepen Participation and Collaboration

During Connected Educator Month, many organizations joined the common effort toward a more connected profession. Already connected



educators took personal responsibility for getting their colleagues engaged online, and the newly connected saw themselves as part of a larger movement.

This emerging sense of shared enterprise has yielded a potentially powerful network of individuals and institutions that could be activated to improve education. The desire shared by many participants that “every month should be Connected Educator Month” could shape the future of the profession if it leads to the assumption of collective responsibility to build on opportunities for online social learning and collaboration.

Taking advantage of this network will require broadening and deepening organizational and individual participation and collaboration. To this end, convening organizations could take these steps to scale up and sustain events like Connected Educator Month:

- **Engage a much broader group of organizations in planning and collaborating to provide connected online learning opportunities.** Key allies could include organizations that might not yet be regularly engaged in supporting online learning and collaboration but that have the ability through traditional means to reach a large number of educators who are not yet connected. Likewise, district and school leaders can influence the educators they oversee, both through the policies they enact and, perhaps more important, by their example. With their expertise and commitment, these organizations and individuals could help secure institutional endorsements, broker collaborative relationships, develop navigation aids, and provide analytic tools. Similarly,

tracking participation and the value it creates could become a collaborative enterprise.

- **Push the boundaries for participation.** The primary focus of Connected Educator Month was on K–12 education in the United States and on learning and collaboration conducted online. With more diversified sponsorship and leadership, future iterations could profitably move beyond these boundaries, such as through more actively inviting global participation, intentionally including adult and higher education (teacher education in particular), developing more events and activities that include other education stakeholders (such as students and parents), and actively encouraging the integration of the online and the face-to-face through such venues as meet-ups, back-to-school professional development events, and ongoing, site-based professional learning communities.
- Diversify the formats for online interactions. As the proportion of connected educators continues to increase, an increasing proportion of activities should be devoted to *deepening* participation, in an increasing diversity of formats.

## 4. Strengthen Research on the Impact of Online Social Learning and Collaboration

As the event archives and social media records show, Connected Educator Month produced a considerable volume and variety of content and activity that would benefit from more extensive analysis. Through the Connected Educators

project and, potentially, with other researchers, these additional research efforts could be helpful:

- **Systematic study of the impact** of online social learning and collaboration on educators' professional practices, attitudes, and effectiveness.
- **Deeper and more systematic content analysis** of archived transcripts, recordings, and social media postings using computational linguistics and natural language processing techniques.
- **Collection and analysis of usage data** from distributed activities provided by participating organizations. (The project provided code to all organizations to allow sharing of usage data, but only a small subset implemented it.) Additional Web analytic records or content generated through distributed activities could be examined profitably using methodologies such as social network analysis.

- **Analysis of the value created by participation.**

Connected Educators research has employed the narrative framework for determining value generated by participation in communities and networks developed by Wenger, Trayner, and De Laat (2011). Collecting and analyzing value creation stories from participants aligned with this framework could yield a much more nuanced picture of how participation has influenced practice and outcomes.

- **Repetition of content and value creation analyses six months and a year after the event**

to determine to what extent individual participation in online communities and social learning networks is sustained and whether new organizational initiatives and partnerships launched during Connected Educator Month continue and grow.

### What Can Districts Do Now?

- Download and use the Connected Educator Month [District Toolkit](#) to find out how to integrate the resources and learning into district professional development.
- Make the [Connected Educator Starter Kit](#) available to educators—all the activities in this kit apply year-round.
- Mine the [Connected Educator Month](#) archives for online professional development opportunities, such as webinars, that complement face-to-face interactions.
- Encourage participation in online communities and professional social learning communities by leadership example and by giving educators recognition and continuing education credit for online learning and collaboration.
- Tap connected educators to blog about their experiences.
- Promote [adopt-a-colleague](#) initiatives by encouraging connected educators to recruit unconnected educators to participate in an online event or activity or to join an online community.

## Next Steps for Connected Educators

The Connected Educators Project is either implementing or exploring several additional options to keep the momentum of Connected Educator Month alive:

- **Further developing a badge collection and complete a set of cross-community guided tours** informed by discussions and examples from Connected Educator Month and support additional postevent contests as opportunities to collect and reflect on the best of what we have learned.
- **Using the #ce12 hashtag** to continue the connected education dialogue in general and to start talking together about what we would like to do together in the future, whether in a Connected Educator Month 2013 or other initiatives.
- **Encouraging and moderating more extended discussions about Connected Educator Month and connected education** in the [Education Community Managers Network](#) on LinkedIn.
- **Reopening the Connected Educator Month calendar to new events and activities** on selected topics involving multiple collaborating organizations and promoting these events via the same mechanisms used during Connected Educator Month.
- **Promoting events and activities that use the Connected Educator Month archives** as jumping-off points to follow up on the event's discussions.
- **Expanding the use of [ConnectedEducators.org](#) as a place where the field shares its work**, via existing vehicles like the Innovation Exchange blog and new ones like the upcoming Community Cookbook.

# A Call to Action: Connect Every Educator

“**Let’s think of Connected Educator Month as a team planning meeting.** Let’s use this time to highlight the benefits, explore the possibilities, decide on a vision, determine a plan of action, and then to **commit to individual ‘action steps’ that we will take locally to help manifest that vision.**”

—Stephanie Sandifer, 15-year teaching veteran, technology coach,  
and author, Houston, Texas

Because of its interest in connected education, and its support for the Connected Educators project, the U.S. Department of Education saw an opportunity to convene the first Connected Educator Month.

The quantitative and qualitative impact of the event, and the lessons learned from it, provide convincing evidence that educators value and benefit from the special, concentrated mix of online social learning events and activities. These events and activities, many of which are highly innovative in education, are possible only through cross-organizational, cross-boundary collaboration.

Many participating organizations and individual educators believe that Connected Educator Month should not go down in history as a one-off event. The leading education organizations that participated in the first event should convene now to plan for Connected Educator Month 2013 and engage more organizations and individual educators to get involved to make the magnitude of participation, collaboration, and impact ever stronger.

The loudest shared sentiment expressed by many connected and inspired educators was that “every month should be Connected Educator Month.” That, indeed, is the vision of connected teaching that we should work together to achieve.

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